

# Spiritan Magazine

---

Volume 32  
Number 1 *February*

Article 9

---

2-2008

## Lives on a Mission

Caroline O'Doherty

Follow this and additional works at: <https://dsc.duq.edu/spiritan-tc>

---

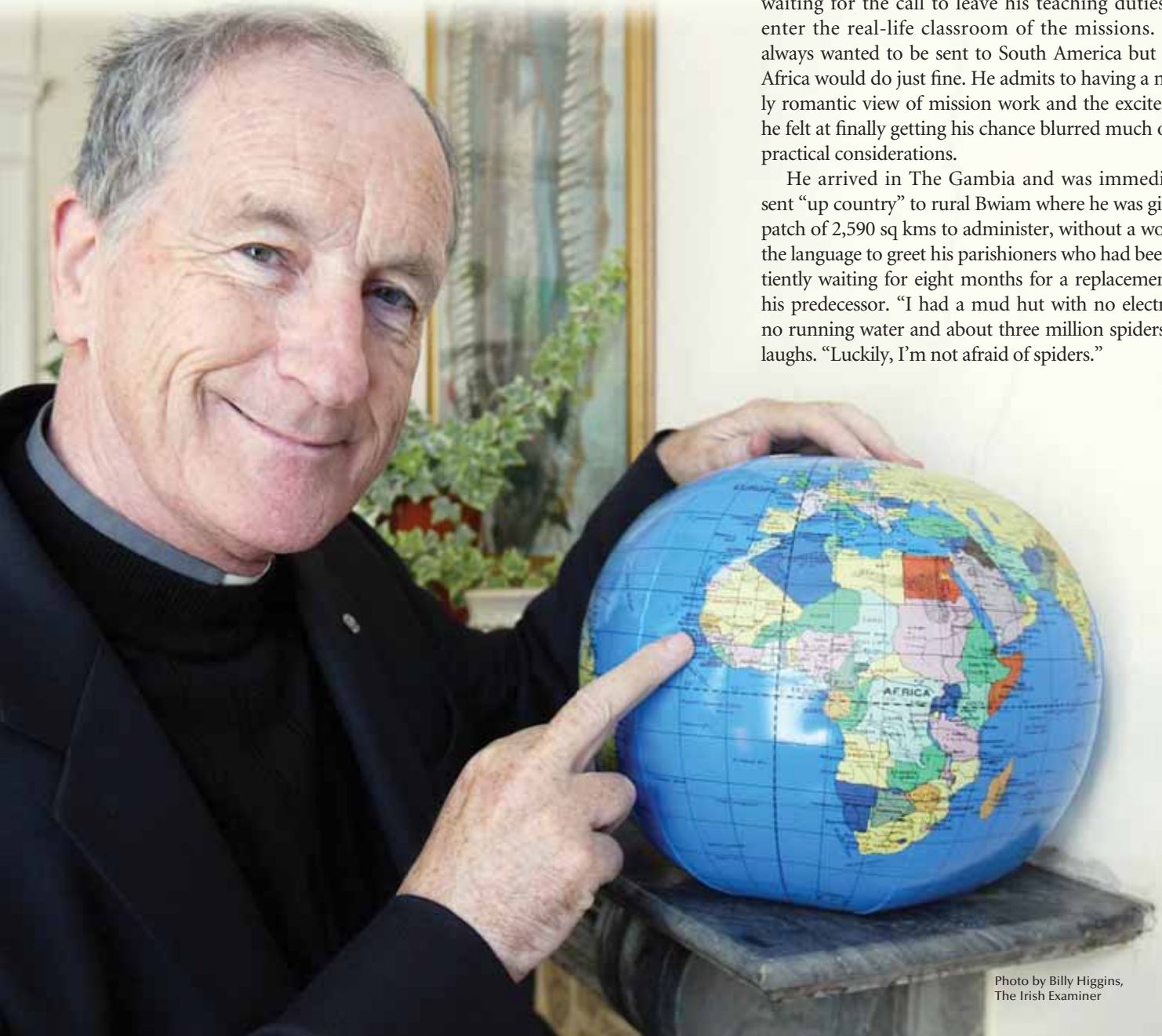
### Recommended Citation

O'Doherty, C. (2008). Lives on a Mission. *Spiritan Magazine*, 32 (1). Retrieved from <https://dsc.duq.edu/spiritan-tc/vol32/iss1/9>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Spiritan Collection at Duquesne Scholarship Collection. It has been accepted for inclusion in Spiritan Magazine by an authorized editor of Duquesne Scholarship Collection.

# Lives on a Mission

Caroline O'Doherty



## THE GAMBIA / PERU

**W**hen Ed Grimes, CSSp received orders to put away his theology texts and pack a bag for the The Gambia, his first thoughts were: Where is The Gambia and why is there a “the” before its name?

The latter, he would be told, was to avoid confusion with Zambia. That was one question answered, but it didn’t clear up his own confusion about where on earth he was going. He wasn’t sure where Zambia was either.

### Never out of Ireland before

It was 1974 and the 34-year-old Cork-born Spiritan priest who’d never been out of Ireland before was just the latest in a long line of Irish missionaries dispatched to countries they hadn’t heard of to do work for which they were ill-prepared. Still, Ed consulted an atlas, packed his bags and left for “the white man’s grave” of West Africa with enthusiasm borne of 16 long years waiting for the call to leave his teaching duties and enter the real-life classroom of the missions. He’d always wanted to be sent to South America but West Africa would do just fine. He admits to having a naively romantic view of mission work and the excitement he felt at finally getting his chance blurred much of the practical considerations.

He arrived in The Gambia and was immediately sent “up country” to rural Bwiam where he was given a patch of 2,590 sq kms to administer, without a word of the language to greet his parishioners who had been patiently waiting for eight months for a replacement for his predecessor. “I had a mud hut with no electricity, no running water and about three million spiders,” he laughs. “Luckily, I’m not afraid of spiders.”



Louise Ryan in Peru.

## Let loose in Peru

Thirty years later in 2004, a well-travelled young physiotherapist from Castleblaney, Co. Monaghan, set off for Peru to join the Columban Sisters mission in the capital, Lima. Louise Ryan, then aged 27, had researched the Columban order on the internet, packed appropriately for her stay and spent three months learning the language before she was let loose on the community at large. She spent two years there on the Columbans' formation programme before returning last year to officially enter the order as a novice and begin her formal journey towards becoming a nun. Next year, she hopes, she will be a fully-fledged missionary sister.

"I was very grateful for the opportunity to share in the sisters' work in Peru. I came away very inspired. Also in awe — I wondered if I could do what they were doing, would I be good at it. But mostly inspired because I saw what it really meant to be on the missions."

## Support from back home

While much has changed in the way missionaries prepare and are prepared for a life abroad, some things have not. The mix of desire to serve and appetite for adventure that has driven many a mission vocation remains essential — as does support from back home. Generations of missionaries have depended upon this

support. "In my largest church in The Gambia, the weekly collection came to the equivalent of about a dollar," says Ed, who is now national director of the Pontifical Mission Societies in Ireland. "That's why I appreciate the work I'm doing now. I know the difference it makes on the ground."

But what exactly happens on the ground in a Catholic mission? Anyone who has visions of zealous crusaders in unsuitably heavy clothing, proselytizing every man, woman, child and goat with every breath may well be relieved — or disappointed. Mission work, it seems, is a far more subtle and eminently more practical affair.

## Basic health care

In the shanty towns of Lima, the physiotherapy skills Louise had displayed in three and a half years working in Portlaoise General Hospital were put to good use, helping people who had little or no basic healthcare, never mind specialist medical treatment. "I was working with a very wide range of conditions — people with physical disabilities, some of whom never got out of their houses; children with cerebral palsy and Down's syndrome, people with rheumatoid arthritis.

"There was a lot of home visitation work because people don't have clinics to go to and they don't go to hospital unless they absolutely have to because they can't afford to.

"What really shocked me is that people have to pay for their medication, even in an emergency. They still need to go get bandages and pain relief and bring it to the doctors. Often they don't have the money to get a full course of antibiotics so they only buy what they can and then of course the infection comes back."

## Importance of wells

Healthcare, or the lack of it, was also one of the first problem that struck Ed about his pastoral community, although he tackled it in a different way. The son of a professor of bacteriology who taught at University College Cork, he knew something about disease prevention and quickly began a well building programme. "There was a lot of illness, especially among the children, and I decided I better do something to ensure a clean water supply. I got the support of Trócaire and we started digging wells and lining them with concrete so



that dirt and animal waste wouldn't seep into the water. We helped provide 324 wells and they're still working today."

### **The day's grind**

But it's not all shovels and medical manuals. Obviously the mission of a Catholic mission is to spread and strengthen the Catholic faith and the day's grind must reflect that goal.

For Ed, as a priest, there was a fair amount of structure to his religious work. He said weekly Mass at four churches, each almost 50 km from the other; was chaplain to the mission schools and, in later years, became the frequently travelling secretary general to the Catholic bishops of Sierra Leone, Liberia and The Gambia.

But while the success of a mission might have been viewed in the past in terms of the physical presence of the Church, the reach of its administrative structures and the number of its converts, Ed takes a different view.

### **Building bridges between the faiths**

While the number of Gambian priests rose from zero to nine during his time there, he says: "The Gambia was, still is, 95% Muslim. Our schools were 98% or 99% Muslim — we certainly didn't go looking for baptism certs before we let the children in. Did I convert a single Muslim? Probably not. But did I build bridges between the faiths? I believe I did.

"When I think back on how I was at the start — being the white man coming in, thinking he knew everything and ready to teach these poor uneducated Africans about God. You learn very quickly to forget those notions."

"I had a brilliant catechist who interpreted for me. He would say: Father, would it be better if you did this? He was saying: Father, you haven't a clue. He'd say: Father, this is a big word, why not use a small word? In other words: Father, this is rubbish.

"You don't impose God on the Africans — they are people who have a great sense of God already. You don't impose your beliefs on the Muslims. You talk and you listen.

"There is danger on both sides — Christian fundamentalists and Muslim fundamentalists — they are ones who do the damage.

"We both believed in the one God. You have to allow people to go to God in their own ways. When I had to leave The

Gambia in 1991, Muslims came to say goodbye to me, to wish me well. That to me was an achievement."

### **Being with the people**

In the past, Irish missionary sisters were brilliantly adept at replicating Irish convent life in the most un-Irish of places, but over time they came to realize that it was neither a necessary nor particularly fruitful way of fulfilling the missionary ideal.

Now it's rare enough to find a nun wearing her habit abroad and in strictly controlled countries like China and Burma where the Columbans also work, the delicacy of relations with state authorities means the sisters do not outwardly advertise their religion.

"Missions have changed because of Vatican II [the set of reforms initiated by

## **"We don't bring God to the people — God is there among them."**

Rome in the 1960's to modernize the Church]" Louise explains. "Some of the sisters are involved in the more traditional catechetical work — it's still very important — but being a missionary is more about being with the people, bearing witness to their struggles, sharing their sorrows and their joys, working for justice and peace. It's more about you as an individual living the fullest life you can and giving to God through your work rather than just complying with stringent rules. We don't bring God to the people — God is there among them."

### **Known beyond regular churchgoers**

It could be argued that in an increasingly secular society, the God factor may work against missionaries who, to some degree have to compete with the lay development and aid organizations for financial support from the public.

Louise, however, is optimistic that the work of the missions is known beyond regular churchgoers. "Even if you're not particularly religious, I think you can find reason to support our work. You don't have to be at Mass to express your faith — the quality of giving, of supporting a sense

of community — that's expressing faith whether you subscribe to a religion or not." Whatever about the faith of donors, the faith of many missionaries has been tested to the full. Louise was conscious during her time in Lima that an Irish Columban, Sr. Joan Sawyer, paid the ultimate price for her vocation in 1983 when she was shot dead during a siege at a prison where she was visiting the wretched inmates.

### **Missionaries when they've left the missions**

Ed had personally "thought the angels were coming" on numerous occasions. He survived three spectacular crash landings in fragile aircraft and 18 vigorous bouts of malaria. To his continued disappointment, he was forced to leave Gambia in 1991 after contracting a mystery bug that lost him

half his body weight and laid him low for a year. He was all set to return when a final medical check found his immune system was permanently damaged and he would probably not survive another inevitable bout of malaria, and though he remains in missionary work in an administrative way now, he has a permanent itch to return to the field. "I'm lucky to have a job because traditionally, missionaries went out, did their work, came home and died. There wasn't much for them when they couldn't physically do the work any longer."

Again, time has changed the way the missionary orders care for and make use of their retiring members. The Columbans were to the fore in setting up the Migrant Information Centre in Dublin, through which retired sisters help immigrants facing a challenging new environment. "The sisters coming back to retire are a great resource," said Louise. "They have huge experience, fantastic language skills and a great drive to keep working. This enables them to be missionaries even when technically they've left the missions." ■

---

Reprinted with permission from *The Irish Examiner*.